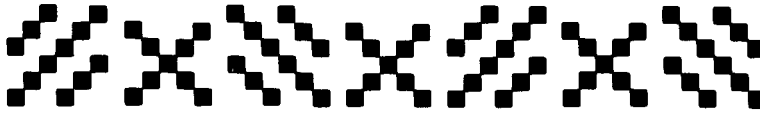


A Forgotten Feminist: The Early Writings of Ida Husted Harper, 1878-1894

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Early in the 1870s a young woman secretly began sending articles under a male pseudonym to the Terre Haute *Saturday Evening Mail*. Not until September, 1882, did her name, Ida Husted Harper, appear with her writings.¹ In addition to writing for the Terre Haute *Saturday Evening Mail*, Harper later accepted Eugene V. Debs' advice to "get the railroaders' wives interested in the Brotherhood." From 1883 to 1894 she wrote a monthly column, "The Woman's Department," in the *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine*, the house organ of Debs' Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen. And for a brief period in 1890 Harper was managing editor of the Terre Haute *Daily News*, leading it through a spirited local election and supporting reform candidates who eventually won.²

In her writings and in the manner of her living Harper challenged the dominant view of women and women's place in late nineteenth century society. But Harper herself was deeply affected by that society, as her views on women's rights clearly show. Not willing to accept the role assigned to nineteenth century women, she also was unable or unwilling to argue consistently for full equality between the sexes. Instead, she stood as a transitional figure, struggling with her readers in Terre Haute, with her colleagues in the

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¹ Clifton J. Phillips, "Ida A. Husted Harper," in Edward T. James, Janet Wilson James, and Paul S. Boyer, eds., *Notable American Women, 1607-1950: A Biographical Dictionary* (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), 139; Terre Haute *Saturday Evening Mail*, September 9, 1882.

² Ray Ginger, *The Bending Cross: A Biography of Eugene V. Debs* (New Brunswick, N. J., 1949), 31; Phillips, "Ida A. Husted Harper," 139.

women's rights movement, and perhaps with herself to define a better yet socially acceptable position for women, a position between submissiveness and full equality.

The nineteenth century society in which Harper lived and about which she wrote dictated a specific mold for its women. The feminine ideal was innocent like Henry James' Daisy Miller, helpless like Nathaniel Hawthorne's Priscilla, self denying and devoted as Louisa May Alcott was to her ailing father, and in general purer, more generous than, and morally superior to men.³ But women were also weaker and less intelligent than men, a supposition approved by medical science. In 1873, for example, Dr. Edward H. Clarke wrote that because of the female's larger, more complicated, and more important "reproductive apparatus" and because mental activity exerted a greater "sterilizing influence" on the female than on the male, identical education of the two sexes was "a crime before God and humanity" which would result in the propagation of inferior beings.⁴ Several years later Dr. A. Hughes Bennett stated flatly that women's mental powers were less than men's because their brains were smaller. Women, he said, were also physically weaker than men, more "nervous and hysterical," more talented at nonessential detail work, more emotional, and generally suited only for marriage and child rearing.⁵

Such images of the feminine ideal were widely transmitted in the mass circulated ladies magazines that had first gained popularity in the 1840s and in newspapers, including those for which Harper wrote. The pure, pious, domestic, submissive feminine ideal was also reflected in sentimental poetry and fiction. Women who did not meet the ideal, or who rejected it, were, like Hawthorne's Zenobia, treated as mysterious creatures, veiled in black and destined for self destruction.⁶

³ David M. Kennedy, *Birth Control in America: The Career of Margaret Sanger* (New Haven, 1970), 50-60.

⁴ Edward H. Clarke, *Sex In Education; or, A Fair Chance For Girls* (Boston, 1873), 127, 137, 139.

⁵ A. Hughes Bennett, "Hygiene in the Higher Education of Women," *Popular Science Monthly*, XVI (February, 1880), 519-30. See also Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Charles Rosenberg, "The Female Animal: Medical and Biological Views of Woman and Her Role in Nineteenth-Century America," *Journal of American History*, LX (September, 1973), 332-56.

⁶ Leslie A. Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York, 1966), 223-24, 291-312; Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly*, XVIII (Summer, 1966), 152, 174.

The extent to which the feminine ideal took root in Indiana in the late nineteenth century is indicated in the legal position of Hoosier women. Divorce laws specified that husbands bear the expenses of court action and alimony; remarried women could not sell or give away their property with or without their husbands' consent; and possession of all birth control devices was illegal. In addition, widowers received all of their deceased wives' property, while widows were required to divide their husbands' property with their children. Indiana manufacturers were bound to provide seats for their women employees and to allow them to use the seats "when they are not necessarily engaged in the active duties for which they are employed." Boys under fourteen and all women were forbidden from working in coal mines, and one law stated that no person under sixteen and no woman under eighteen could be required to work more than sixty hours a week or ten hours a day.⁷ Of course, not all women, or men, accepted the feminine ideal. In 1848, three years before Harper's birth, hundreds of men and women met at Seneca Falls, New York, to proclaim women's equality with men and women's right to speak and act freely. In 1851 Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton began a long and productive friendship that centered on their interest in women's rights, particularly suffrage. Also in that year Sojourner Truth, the slave who had sued for her son's freedom and won, presented her eloquent "And ain't I a woman?" speech at a women's rights convention in Ohio.⁸

In 1851 Indiana's earliest women's suffrage society was formed at Dublin. In 1859 Mary F. Thomas and other Hoosier women presented their women's rights petition to the Indiana legislature. These efforts to contradict the feminine ideal met with derision and rebuke; but they meant that Ida Husted Harper was not acting alone or without precedent when she began writing about women's rights in the 1870s.⁹

⁷ Indiana, *Laws* (1873), 111-12; (1875), 179; (1877), 56; (1899), 131; (1891), 331; (1897), 101.

⁸ Gerda Lerner, *The Woman in American History* (Menlo Park, Calif., 1971), 83, 88, 38.

⁹ Pat Creech Scholten, "A Public 'Jollification': The 1859 Women's Rights Petition before the Indiana Legislature," *Indiana Magazine of History*, LXXII (December, 1976), 347-59; Ida Husted Harper and Susan B. Anthony, eds., *History of Woman Suffrage, 1883-1900* (Indianapolis, 1902), 614. This is Volume IV of the *History of Woman Suffrage*. Previous volumes were edited by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joselyn Gage. Harper edited volumes IV, V, and VI.

Ida Husted was born in Fairfield, Indiana, February 18, 1851, the eldest of three children. Interested in obtaining good educations for their children, her parents later moved the family to Muncie. In 1868 Ida entered Indiana University but left after one year to become, at eighteen, the high school principal at Peru, Indiana. Three years later she married Thomas W. Harper and moved with him to Terre Haute where he later became city attorney and chief legal counsel for Debs' Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and where she began her career as a feminist.¹⁰

Terre Haute in 1871 was a town of approximately 25,000 residents. Bounded by the Wabash River and crossed by the National Road, it was economically dependent upon railroads, coal mines, distilleries, breweries, and foundries. Terre Haute also claimed in the early 1870s two colleges, two hotels, six banks, and several churches.¹¹ A contemporary historical sketch of the town boasted that, in addition to its fertile atmosphere for business growth, "the moral character of our city is at least equal to that of any other city, where an equal amount of business is done."¹² Besides its businesses and institutions Terre Haute also supported four newspapers. The contemporary account noted above described the *Saturday Evening Mail*, for which Harper wrote, as containing "the choicest short stories, the current news of the day, spicy paragraphs, and epitome of the city news, personals, etc." And the newspaper claimed the largest circulation of any state paper except those published in Indianapolis.¹³

Harper's column in the Terre Haute *Evening Mail*, "A Woman's Opinions," was not unusual in its title or concept. The *Evening Mail* regularly published articles for and about women. Such columns as "A Woman's Thoughts," "Feminitems," "Fashion Fancies," and "Feminine Freaks" appeared on the front page and superseded local and national news. In July, 1881, notice of the shooting of President James Garfield appeared on page four. Only his death in September

¹⁰ Phillips, "Ida A. Husted Harper," 139.

¹¹ Loren Hassam, *A Historical Sketch of Terre Haute, Indiana, Its Advantages for Manufacture and Attractions as a Home* (Terre Haute, 1873), 22.

¹² *Ibid.*, 21.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 58; *Terre Haute City Directory* (Terre Haute, 1881), 300.

removed the chatty columns from page one.¹⁴ Many of these columns appeared prior to Harper's, and some continued after "A Woman's Opinions" had disappeared. But the sphere of each was in keeping with the feminine ideal: fireside, family, fashion, food.

Harper included these subjects among her offerings, but she also wrote on a topic infrequently seen in the *Evening Mail*—women's rights. In one of her early columns Harper defined women's rights as "the right to pursue whatever vocation in life she is best adapted for . . ."¹⁵ Equal rights, then, involved simply the right to earn a living at whatever a woman felt qualified to do. By today's standards the definition was a narrow one. But the middle or upper class white woman of the nineteenth century was not expected to work, or even to want to work outside the home. The feminine ideal dictated that she remain at home while her husband provided the family's income. If she did work, it was only because she had to. Harper proselytized especially for the cause of those women who were forced to work to survive. But she also wrote forcefully about other subjects: womanhood, marriage, divorce, careers, education, temperance, and suffrage—all of which were gradually added to her concept of women's rights.

The philosophy of the feminine ideal made its mark on Harper, for throughout her writings ran one constant assumption—that a woman would marry and have a family. She also believed that women were the moral superiors of men and that women's participation in activities traditionally proscribed to men would raise the quality of those activities. Often she stereotyped women as gossiping, flirtatious, jealous, and unreliable. Yet she could also write of their strength, suffering, and sisterhood. She never wrote about her own life, which frequently contradicted her writings, but Harper seldom described specific situations. Rather, she generalized about the subject at hand. As such, Harper's writings frequently became florid, exaggerated, simplistic. She was at her best when she narrowed her sights.

Harper's first column in 1878 in the *Evening Mail* dealt with religion, not women's rights. She asked to be excused

¹⁴ Terre Haute *Saturday Evening Mail*, July 9, 1881, September 24, 1881.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, October 25, 1879.



IDA HUSTED HARPER

Reproduced from Susan B. Anthony and Ida
Husted Harper, eds., *History of Woman Suffrage*
(Rochester, 1902), 1042.

by the male writer of "Town Talk," whose ideas she was refuting, and admitted that he had the "advantage over [her] in age, sex, wisdom and experience," but that she would, nevertheless, throw "a little 'paper-wad' . . . at [his] bald and venerable head." She then proceeded to support statements made by "the great agnostic," Robert Ingersoll, that lessons of hell's fire and damnation should be expunged from the creeds of all churches.¹⁶ While primarily concerned with the Ingersoll controversy, two columns later Harper touched on women's rights for the first time:

If I should write this: "There are four seasons, Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter. Some like Spring best, some like Summer best, some like Autumn best and some like Winter best, but as for me, give me Liberty or give me Death," some captious critic would come out with an article next week discussing the propriety of a *woman's* asking for Liberty.¹⁷

Although she wrote with wit and humor, Harper did not consider the women's rights issue a joke. She discussed it in her column so frequently that she received requests, especially from men, that she cease. "When all the wrongs shall have been righted," she replied, "the laws revised, the disabilities removed and equal rights secured in every respect, then will the conscientious woman feel that she can afford to speak and write upon other topics."¹⁸ Besides, she wrote, men were responsible for the unequal status of women. Men made the laws and established the customs which barred women from true equality. Only through the consent of men could women enter colleges, speak in public, and choose careers. And it would be only by men's favor that women would someday be allowed to vote. Truly, the "opposing force" was men, who considered "the greatest favor they could confer was to marry [a woman] and allow her the privilege of keeping house for them."¹⁹

Men certainly led more tranquil lives than women, Harper believed. At one point she asked if there existed "one single advantage" to being a woman: "If Heaven is anything like this world we do not care to be an angel or carry a palm or play on a harp but only to be a man and take

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, October 26, 1878.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, November 9, 1878.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, May 31, 1884.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, January 19, 1884.

our chances." Little girls with tomboy preferences were restricted to more feminine pursuits. And when they grew up they were constricted by corsetted clothes that made walking a "punishment rather than a pleasure." As a housewife, the woman worked as many hours as her husband but with no pay. Instead, she was required to ask for money, then make a full accounting of it to her husband. She bore the pain of childbirth and the trials of child rearing but lost the children in the event of a divorce. Even at her death the woman could not will her possessions as she wished: they belonged to the husband. And if she chose to work, the woman faced a plethora of problems: sex discrimination, low wages, poor working conditions, easy dismissal. "In short," Harper wrote, "it is utterly impossible for a woman to be thoroughly independent."²⁰

Even in the face of these seemingly obvious injustices Harper believed many men feared the results if women were given equal rights. Men were afraid that when women became independent "their charm will disappear, and their influence will be material rather than spiritual." Harper exclaimed, "God Forbid!" and then added, "to give a woman every opportunity for development which is enjoyed by man, will tend to make her more nearly the perfect and ideal woman."²¹

Harper's image of the perfect and ideal woman vacillated in her writings. On one hand she declared that women were "the synonym of delicacy, of clinging trustfulness, of tender helplessness" and that the "moral nature of women is, and ever will be, of a higher nature than that of man."²² But on the other hand she believed women were gossipy, had an "overpowering desire" to find bargains, and that they tried to show off only their favorable attributes before marriage.²³ She also wrote that their "strongest sentiments" were devotion to children and love of home, that a woman naturally craved a home and would remain forever discontented without one.²⁴ Although Harper placed "earnest, sincere" women

²⁰ *Ibid.*, October 6, 1883.

²¹ Ida Harper, "The Woman of the Future," *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine*, XVI (February, 1892), 121.

²² *Terre Haute Saturday Evening Mail*, March 31, 1883.

²³ *Ibid.*, November 9, 1878, January 20, 1883, May 12, 1883.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, July 5, 1884.

in an elevated position as the "salvation of mankind," she could close a column praising a woman run hotel with the declaration "let us leave the subject of women who are, after all, somewhat of a bore" ²⁵

Harper's conflicting ideas on women appeared most evident in her writings on the woman's place in marriage. In an article much like a modern personal advice column Harper counselled women about choosing mates. Ignoring considerations that might favor a more equal status for the woman, Harper urged women to seek temperance above all, and then strong character, sound business ability, and finally a good disposition, which was essential if a woman's homemaking abilities were to be appreciated. ²⁶ In another article Harper stated unequivocally that "there is no one thing on earth a woman desires so much as a home. She who does not is an anomaly, there is something radically wrong about her." Yet she had written five years earlier that there was no longer any discredit if a woman did not marry, as there had been "in those days when a woman's life was considered a failure unless she prefixed 'Mrs.' to her name." ²⁷

Harper advised men to look for a woman with a good disposition first, then similarity of tastes and housekeeping abilities. Although Harper predicted that a good wife would be an asset to a man's career, in her view the man was obviously the center of the marriage. ²⁸ But much later, in 1888, she wrote of the need for complete equality in marriage and villified any idea that a wife should obey her husband. "The very idea seems ridiculous," she wrote. "To obey another means to be ruled by this person. In a true marriage there will be no question as to which shall govern the other but it will be an equal partnership in every respect." Then she added:

The surprising part of it is that many honest, conscientious, God-fearing wives are so influenced by a sickly religious sentiment as to believe that the Lord intended the husband should be the master. They have been taught this doctrine by men-preachers from a Bible prepared by men-translators.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, June 20, 1883, October 7, 1882.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, February 8, 1879.

²⁷ *Firemen's Magazine*, VIII (July, 1884), 410; *Terre Haute Saturday Evening Mail*, April 19, 1879.

²⁸ *Terre Haute Saturday Evening Mail*, February 1, 1879.

We may read nine-tenths of the Bible without finding it but when we come to the last tenth we find this dreadful bugaboo, which has been used to discipline women for hundreds of years, appears alone in the writings of Saul, who had to be struck blind before he would believe in the Lord, and who then began to exercise all that bigotry and intolerance characteristic of a new convert.²⁹

Early in her career, in 1879, Harper wrote that a happy marriage itself was "the fairest and sweetest portion of a woman's life."³⁰ At the time she was alarmed by the climbing divorce rate and wondered if stricter divorce laws should be enacted.³¹ But in 1890, just before her thirty-ninth birthday, Harper's own marriage ended in divorce, at her initiative.³² Even so, later that year Harper wrote that a happy marriage lay "at the very foundation of the country's purity and prosperity," and that it should be "cherished as the pearl of great price." In fact, "no institution in all the world" could compare in importance to marriage.³³

By 1890 Harper was well aware that not all marriages were happy, and she at least recognized divorce, if only as the last resort, when there was no hope for "reconciliation, for reform, or for happiness." For women who could not or would not seek divorce, Harper advised that the best way to "escape" the "abject misery" of an unhappy marriage was to busy oneself fully with "some congenial pursuit."³⁴ The greatest cause of divorce, she wrote, was "the absence of the husband at night." She did not advocate preventing him from an occasional evening with his friends, but she also did not advocate his being gone frequently.³⁵ By the same logic Harper believed that women should have a lodge in which to spend "a pleasant evening once a week. A woman," she

²⁹ Ida Harper, "Obedience," *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine*, XII (October, 1888), 749-50.

³⁰ Terre Haute *Saturday Evening Mail*, February 15, 1879.

³¹ *Ibid.*, March 1, 1879.

³² Index of Suits Decided, No. 1, February 10, 1890, Vigo County Records, Vigo County Court House, Terre Haute. Although the Harpers' divorce is recorded in county books, the papers themselves are missing from county files. Hence, no reason for the divorce is available from this source.

³³ Ida Harper, "A Plea for Bachelors," *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine*, XIV (March, 1890), 222-23; Ida Harper, "The Wife's Smile," *ibid.*, XIV (April, 1890), 312-13; Ida Harper, "A Word About Marriage," *ibid.*, XIV (July, 1890), 608.

³⁴ Ida Harper, "A Chapter for Wives," *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine*, XVI (April, 1892), 315.

³⁵ Terre Haute *Saturday Evening Mail*, March 22, 1884.

added, "grows lonely and tired and disheartened from close confinement and household cares day after day and month after month."³⁶ She stated flatly that "if a husband may say 'you have food, clothes, and shelter, that is sufficient,' by the same logic the wife can say, 'your home is in order, your meals are ready, your clothes are mended, it is not your business what my habits are or where I spend my nights.'"³⁷

The household duties which might drive a woman to depression also generated some conflict in Harper's writings. In one place she drew a picture of idealistic, if stereotyped, domestic happiness which comfortably fit into the nineteenth century mold for women: "Woman is made for home. With comfortable surroundings, a loving, congenial husband, and good, affectionate children, every woman can be happy and contented. If all could attain this ideal life, we would hear no petition for more 'rights,' divorces would be unknown, women would not go forth to labor for existence, and the whole world would be full of peace and happiness." But in the same article Harper also asserted ideas which carried modern tones of sisterhood and solidarity: "Women must work for women. We must advise, encourage, sustain and sympathize with one another. Only women can understand the needs of women and can appreciate the difficulties and temptations, the cares and burdens and disappointments that rise up in the path. Men are kind, they are helpful, but the strength and support a woman most needs, must come from those of her own sex."³⁸

Harper also expressed ambivalent notions about child-bearing. "The highest praise that can be given a woman," she wrote in 1886, "is to say she is a good mother, wife, and housekeeper. Afterwards, if you please, a writer, a singer, a scholar, a philanthropist."³⁹ But in 1879 she had questioned: "why should every woman's life be a sacrifice? All women are no more fitted to be mothers than all men are to be fathers, and even if a woman be possessed of those qualities that fit her for motherhood, it may be that she chooses to exercise them in some other direction and she herself, should

³⁶ *Firemen's Magazine*, VII (April, 1883), 169.

³⁷ *Terre Haute Saturday Evening Mail*, March 22, 1884.

³⁸ *Firemen's Magazine*, VIII (May, 1884), 290.

³⁹ Ida Harper, "A Chat About Housekeeping," *ibid.*, X (May, 1886), 290.

be sole judge in this matter."⁴⁰ In the same 1879 column there appeared a blunt statement about the birth of female children. The mother of a large family, Harper wrote, "prays in secret that her daughters may be spared the trials of a large family. It is very rarely that you find a mother who wishes her daughter to have children."⁴¹ Later, however, in 1883, Harper romanticized the cycle: the kindness and devotion a husband showed to his wife when she had to care for infants would "fill the young mother's heart with a happiness and gratitude that will last until, with tear-filled eyes, she shall see her own beloved daughters go forth into the world to find, for themselves, the same old but ever new experience."⁴² Still later, in 1887, Harper returned to a less romantic view—that the physical, mental, and nervous strain of bearing children "exceeds any other demand that may be made upon the system."⁴³

Ambivalence was evident again in Harper's attitude toward working women, especially working wives. She wrote in November, 1882, that working women in general never surpassed mediocrity because they brought a "divided energy" to every business pursuit. Their energies were split between work and home in every case: single women were too concerned with marrying to seek promotion, or even to continue working; and since married women worked only in the event of financial necessity or divorce, their interests were clouded by thoughts of home or sorrow. Besides, Harper believed, a marriage contract obliged the woman to tend to home and family; she had "no right" to violate such a contract.⁴⁴

Just four months later Harper urged that women be given full opportunities to fulfill themselves at whatever work they chose. "It would be an unwarrantable impertinence for women to dictate to men what vocation in life they shall be compelled to pursue," she wrote forcefully.

Is it not then equally officious for men to designate just what particular work women shall and shall not do? If a woman has inclination, talent,

⁴⁰ Terre Haute *Saturday Evening Mail*, February 22, 1879.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* Although Harper advocated small families ("what we need is not more men and women, but better and more intelligent ones"), she did not mention birth control in this or any other column of this period.

⁴² Ida Harper, "The Young Mother," *Firemen's Magazine*, VIII (December, 1883), 556.

⁴³ Ida Harper, "The Unvarnished Truth," *ibid.*, XI (March, 1887), 165.

⁴⁴ Terre Haute *Saturday Evening Mail*, November 18, 1882.

and fitness for some special calling, there is where she belongs; and if, through force of circumstance or prejudice she is compelled to devote her time and energy to uncongenial labor, the result is the same as in the case of a man—a fruitless, discontented, undeveloped life.⁴⁵

In the same spirit she declared in 1884 that the proper work for a woman was “whatever she is best fitted by nature and education to do.”⁴⁶ Here Harper apparently meant that women should seek their own level in employment at whatever they felt capable of doing. But the key word in the quotation for understanding Harper’s ideas was “nature.” Quite in keeping with the feminine ideal, she believed that it was “the whole nature” of a woman to seek marriage, that it was “natural for women to love home and children above everything else in the world.” The domestic instinct was “born” in most women. It followed, therefore, that once married, a woman would never forsake those “sweet ties” for outside work “unless compelled to do so by reasons for which the husband is responsible.”⁴⁷

An industrious woman might attempt whatever work she thought best, but only until she married and only because “the industrious girl will make the most satisfactory wife, the neatest housekeeper, the best cook, the most expert needlewoman, the most devoted mother.” Besides, a working woman married to a financially solvent man deprived an indigent woman of a job. The working wife was thus also morally obligated to resign.⁴⁸ Harper further asserted that any single woman who professed a dislike for housework or who claimed she would not keep house after marriage was ruining her chances for matrimony: she should bury such sentiments “deep in her heart and put a seal upon her lips.”⁴⁹

Why then, if Ida Harper believed that the working wife defrauded either her job or her home of her complete energy, if she believed only financially insolvent wives or divorcees should work, if she believed only a single woman should take advantage of their special talents, why then, did she herself

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, March 3, 1883.

⁴⁶ Ida Harper, “Woman’s Work,” *Firemen’s Magazine*, VIII (June, 1884), 350.

⁴⁷ Ida Harper, “Work for Women,” *ibid.*, VII (June, 1883), 261; Ida Harper, “Women Who Work,” *ibid.*, X (March, 1886), 162.

⁴⁸ Harper, “Woman’s Work,” 351; Harper, “Women Who Work,” 161.

⁴⁹ Harper, “Women Who Work,” 161.

work? Harper fit none of these categories. She was a mother, married to a prominent and successful lawyer, and by all of her exclamations, perfectly suited to a life of homemaking.

A tentative answer may lie in the progression of the ideas themselves. In 1884 she wrote that household chores were women's "most important" duties. Five years later she added candidly that housekeeping was monotonous but should still be the wife's only occupation. Her compensation would be her home, her family, and her husband's protection of them all. Later still, and after her divorce, she concluded that "the very hardest thing the housewife has to contend with, [is] that her work is not appreciated at its financial or its industrial value."⁵⁰ The fact that she expressed this opinion in 1891 does not, however, explain her having worked for nearly twenty years prior to reaching it.

Another more plausible answer may lie in a statement Harper made early in her career. In her third column for the *Evening Mail*, November 9, 1878, she wrote that it was "strange" for a married woman, with the "burdens" of a family, to undertake a professional writing career. Yet, she argued, every married woman, while understanding her duties at home, should also assume the responsibility of cultivating her mind—primarily for her husband's sake, secondarily for her own. Cooking, scrubbing, washing, and ironing were not mind expanding enterprises, but reading and writing were. They raised a woman from a "household drudge" to the equal or even superior of her husband. Perhaps, then, Harper continued writing to keep her mind active. Still, it is interesting to note that although early in her career she condemned "the advice generally given to women" to concentrate on homemaking, she later persisted in giving precisely that advice, while ignoring it herself.⁵¹

Harper increasingly viewed education for women as beneficial: "there seems to be the dawning of a day," Harper wrote late in 1878, "when it will be considered essential to educate our girls equally as well as our boys . . ."⁵² Her support of that possibility did not derive so much from a

⁵⁰ Ida Harper, "Greeting," *Firemen's Magazine*, VII (May, 1884), 289; Ida Harper, "One View of Woman's Work," *ibid.*, XIII (November, 1889), 986; Ida Harper, "The Financial Value of Housework," *ibid.*, XV (June, 1891), 522.

⁵¹ Terre Haute *Saturday Evening Mail*, November 9, 1878.

⁵² *Ibid.*, November 16, 1878.

desire to enlighten women's minds as from a wish to increase their chances of matrimony and to impress their husbands' friends. An intelligent wife would, after all, "reflect great credit on [the husband's] choice of a companion."⁵³

Harper's continuing tendency to define women's sphere as subordinate to men's did not prevent her from recognizing the inequities of that belief. Practiced in life, such a creed meant that "it is home or nothing to a woman; it is home and everything he wants besides to a man."⁵⁴ In some areas Harper wrote vigorously against this creed. For example, one of the most obvious inequities was wage discrimination against working women. Because women had no organization, Harper believed, they had no power to demand higher wages. (She did not acknowledge that her own advice for women to quit work after marriage would, when carried out, only add leverage to employers' arguments against raising women's pay.) Strikes, boycotts, protests gained nothing for women, for thousands more stood ready to fill vacancies for lower wages still. Besides, violence was not womanly. Further, Harper believed that equality was hindered by a slave mentality in working women: "women are accustomed to being oppressed. It is their normal condition." They simply had no concept of a better condition. Men were not caught in the same vicious cycle, according to Harper, because they had unions and they had the vote.⁵⁵

If women were to escape the slavery of their own "ruinous underbidding" for wages, they had to be admitted to labor and trade unions. But more important, they had to be granted suffrage. The major problem, of course, was that both of these crucial areas were dominated and controlled by men. Whatever progress was to be made would have to be solely by their sufferance.⁵⁶

About suffrage Harper became singularly rational and noncontradictory. Several barriers needed to be overcome if women were ever to vote. First, women must rid themselves of the idea that acquisition of suffrage would be easy. "Women

⁵³ *Ibid.*, November 23, 1878; Ida Harper, "The College Bred Wife," *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine*, XVII (August, 1893), 716.

⁵⁴ Ida Harper, "How to Keep a Husband," *ibid.*, XII (June, 1888), 429.

⁵⁵ Ida Harper, "Woman's Side of the Labor Question," *ibid.*, X (June, 1886), 348; Ida Harper, "Women Wage Earners," *ibid.*, XVII (May, 1893), 413.

⁵⁶ Harper, "Women Wage Earners," 413.

can scarcely hope to be emancipated," Harper wrote, "as were the slaves, by a stroke of the pen . . ." It would take perseverance and patience and much hard work reminding legislators that women would not let the question die.⁵⁷

Secondly, women would have to quell the opposition of those females "who would deny all other women the suffrage because 'she has all the rights she wants.'" If such women, "engrossed with the fashionable life," could not support suffrage, it was because they lacked the sensibility to see beyond the narrow boundaries of their own lives, to see that working women's lives were different from their own. And, Harper emphasized, it was the working women who most needed the ballot. If they could not see the need, or were "too ignorant to understand the power of suffrage," women like Harper "who have the leisure and the means" must get it for them. Suffrage was not a matter of expedience, but of necessity.⁵⁸

It should be noted, however, that Harper did not welcome suffrage for all Americans. When Indians were enfranchised, her attack on them was bigoted and vituperous.

Here are these immoral, dirty, idle, half-civilized Indians, superstitious, vicious, with no conception of the principles of government, ignorant of law, and yet, if they will graciously accept a farm from Uncle Sam, they are invested with all the dignity and authority of citizenship. And, on the other hand, here are the women of the country, moral, religious, intelligent, interested in whatever acts for the good of mankind, the mothers of the human race, denied this same privilege of citizenship.⁵⁹

A third barrier to be overcome in the fight for suffrage was the temperance crusade, since both temperance and suffrage competed for the attention of reform minded Americans. Because she believed men "liked to be tempted," Harper con-

⁵⁷ Ida Harper, "Progress of Woman in 1885," *ibid.*, X (April, 1886), 225.

⁵⁸ Ida Harper, "Woman Before the Law," *ibid.*, XV (September, 1891), 801; Terre Haute *Saturday Evening Mail*, December 23, 1882.

⁵⁹ Ida Harper, "Our New Voters," *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine*, XVI (September, 1892), 795. Harper's attitudes on ethnicity and race were not unique among suffragists. With the rising number of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe in the 1880s and later, the suffrage movement, which had once called for the vote to be given to all citizens as equals, began claiming the vote for women—white women—as superiors to the foreign born, blacks, and Indians in the United States. A new union formed between northern and southern suffragists to the exclusion of these minorities, and not until the turn of the century did some suffragists adopt a more sympathetic approach. Harper, Anthony, Stanton, Catt, and Anna Howard Shaw all remained prejudiced. See Aileen Kraditor, *The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement, 1890-1920* (Garden City, N. Y., 1971), 105-37.

cluded that they were readily driven to drunkenness. Women could not protect themselves against drunkard husbands because men, no matter their character, controlled all property and wages within the home. The "fatal habit," she wrote, was so widespread that the family which had not suffered from it in some way was rare. "It is the all-powerful danger that threatens the United States and, though we keep a standing army and build a navy of iron clads, yet will this foe from within rise up by night, open the gates and accomplish our overthrow."⁶⁰

In January, 1883, Harper went so far as to say that temperance was "undoubtedly the most important issue before the country. . . . for women are not suffering half so badly from being deprived of the franchise as they are from the evils caused by intemperance." "And yet," she added, "if they do not vote til the temperance question is disposed of, I am afraid Gabriel will have blown his horn and ordered the polls closed."⁶¹ Ten months later Harper had reversed her priorities, claiming that women simply could not fight intemperance without political clout. The problem was not whether women should campaign or hold office, but "whether or not we will have a nation of drunkards." Harper urged women to quit praying for sobriety and begin storming their legislators for the vote instead: "a ballot box stuffed full of prayers would not have the influence of one good, honest vote."⁶²

Still another hurdle which blocked women's suffrage was the attitude that women did not belong in the muck filled political arena. When a man complained that women could say nothing intelligent about politics, Harper replied that if he had been disfranchised all his life, he wouldn't know anything about politics either.⁶³ Harper believed women did belong in politics and, furthermore, that their presence would cause a complete transformation: "There is not a department in life that has not been improved by admitting women," she said.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Terre Haute *Saturday Evening Mail*, June 16, 1883; Ida Harper, "From a Business View," *Firemen's Magazine*, VIII (January, 1884), 27.

⁶¹ Terre Haute *Saturday Evening Mail*, January 27, 1883.

⁶² *Ibid.*, October 13, 1883.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, November 18, 1882.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, April 12, 1884.

Harper's own experience in politics was indirect but successful. Two weeks after her divorce and from February 26 through May 10, 1890, she worked as managing editor of the Terre Haute *Daily News*. Editorially, she and the paper supported a list of Republican reform candidates in the city election. Fearlessly she attacked an influential councilman as a political boss and the entire incumbent council as a "gang who have had the city by the throat for a number of years, depleting the treasury, plunging us into debt, defying the statutes and city laws, trampling underfoot morality and decency, making us a byword and a reproach throughout the state."⁶⁵ It was certainly no more encouraging to Harper that half the Democratic candidates were saloon keepers or that the Terre Haute Brewing Company sent fifteen eight gallon kegs of beer to each Democratic candidate for use in the short campaign. Whether the Republican reform victory resulted from Harper's editorials is unknown, but the *Daily News* claimed their victory as its victory and gave Harper the credit when she left the job shortly after the election.⁶⁶

As large as these barriers seemed, the suffrage movement faced an even more formidable opposition—the prejudice of men. Obviously, Harper reasoned, if men had no vote they would have no power to control their futures, protect their interests, or direct the nation. Only the ballot stood between working men and oppression. To disfranchise men would destroy them.⁶⁷ Why then, she wondered, could men not realize how powerless women felt? The chivalry so many men used as a substitute for equal rights, even as a reason for withholding them, certainly offered no compensation:

It is foolish . . . to talk of the chivalry of American men, of their devotion and kindness to women . . . women cannot eat or drink politeness, or be clothed with chivalry. A man would not, for worlds, let her stand a few minutes in a street car, but the fact that she stands all day behind a counter does not worry him in the least. If a sewing woman should drop her bundle on the sidewalk, he would fly to pick it up, but he would not lose any sleep because that bundle represented a whole day's work and only fifty cents in money.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Terre Haute *Daily News*, March 27, 1890.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, March 25, 1890. The last edition under Harper's direction stated: "Other literary duties demand so much of her time that she found it impracticable to remain with us longer." *Ibid.*, May 10, 1890.

⁶⁷ Terre Haute *Saturday Evening Mail*, September 16, 1882, December 23, 1882.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, December 23, 1882.

Although many such obstacles blocked progress toward suffrage, Harper believed firmly that one day women would vote. In 1878 she met Susan B. Anthony when Debs sponsored Anthony's appearance in Terre Haute after a local literary club refused. "It would not have required any great amount of egging on," Debs wrote afterwards, "to have excited the people to drive her from the community. Even my friends were disgusted with me for piloting such an 'undesirable citizen' into the community." The act reportedly earned Debs Harper's friendship, as well as giving her the opportunity to meet the famous suffrage activist.⁶⁹

From this first meeting grew a friendship between Harper and the suffragist which culminated in Harper's writing of a three volume biography of Anthony. Harper frequently praised Anthony in her columns. "For sound logic and sterling common sense, Susan B. Anthony has no superiors," Harper declared in the Terre Haute *Evening Mail*. "There is only one woman who has been as much abused by men, and that one is the mother-in-law. The same reason will apply to both; they see right through the pretense and deceptions of men and cannot be fooled by them: Miss Anthony goes straight forward on the line she believes to be correct and she would not swerve one inch to gain favor with anybody."⁷⁰ And later Harper wrote: "Miss Anthony's face has something in it which reminds one of Abraham Lincoln's, the same strong, rugged features, softened by lines of weariness and care and spiritualized by an expression of infinite sadness. What Lincoln was to the Republican party in the hour of its great struggle, Susan B. Anthony has been to women in the long contest for rights and justice."⁷¹

As her friendship and admiration for Anthony grew, Harper expanded her activities beyond writing and assumed an active, constant role in the long struggle for the right to vote. She attended suffrage conventions annually in Indiana, Washington, D.C., and elsewhere, and in 1887 acted as state secretary of the Indiana chapter of Anthony's National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA). As such she coor-

⁶⁹ Ray Ginger, *Eugene Debs: A Biography* (New York, 1962), 46.

⁷⁰ Terre Haute *Saturday Evening Mail*, March 22, 1884.

⁷¹ Ida Harper, "Three Women," *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine*, XI (July, 1887), 404.

minated thirteen district conventions in an attempt to secure the passage of a bill granting women municipal suffrage.⁷²

Harper traveled not only for suffrage but for her own benefit as well. Each summer she participated in a chatauqua conference in various sections of the country. In 1884 she attended the Democratic National Convention; in 1886 she helped organize a literary club in Indianapolis, and in 1889 she was present at the inauguration and the inaugural ball of President Benjamin Harrison. In 1893 she joined her only child, Winnifred, as a student at Stanford University, and while in California she was chosen by Anthony to direct press coverage of the state's campaign for a suffrage amendment.⁷³

After leaving Terre Haute, Harper continued to write, concentrating her efforts more than ever on women's rights. Beginning in 1897, she lived with Anthony at Anthony's Rochester, New York, home, sorting through the suffragist's papers in order to write her biography.⁷⁴ She also collaborated with Anthony on the fourth volume of the *History of Woman Suffrage* and later, after suffrage was won, wrote the fifth and sixth volumes of the series, a chronicle of state and national suffrage activities. Harper traveled frequently with Anthony on lecture tours and to suffrage conventions in the United States and in Europe. She served as chairwoman of the International Council of Women's Press Committee from 1899 to 1902 and during the same period edited a woman's column in the Sunday New York *Sun*. From 1909 to 1913 she edited a woman's page in *Harper's Bazaar*. She also wrote weekly syndicated columns during this time for newspapers in Boston, New York, Washington, D.C., Chicago,

⁷² Terre Haute *Saturday Evening Mail*, March 22, 1884; Ida Harper, "The Outlook," *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine*, X (December, 1886), 737-39; Harper, "Three Women," 402-404; Ida Harper, "For the New Year," *ibid.*, XII (January, 1888), 34-35; Ida Harper, "The National Woman's Council," *ibid.*, XV (April, 1891), 334-35; Harper and Anthony, *History of Woman Suffrage*, IV, 615.

⁷³ Terre Haute *Saturday Evening Mail*, July 19, 1884; George S. Cottman, "The Western Association of Writers," *Indiana Magazine of History*, XXIX (September, 1933), 187-90; Terre Haute *Saturday Evening Mail*, February 7, 1885; *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine*, XIII (February-April, 1889); Ida Harper, "Moving the Household Gods and Goods," *ibid.*, XIV (November, 1890), 984-85; Ida Harper, "In Memoriam," *ibid.*, XVI (December, 1892), 1076; *ibid.*, XVII (October, 1893), 867; Phillips, "Ida A. Husted Harper," 139.

⁷⁴ Ida Harper, *The Life and Work of Susan B. Anthony* (3 vols., Indianapolis, 1898-1908).

Philadelphia, and Indianapolis. In the final years of the suffrage campaign, Harper also worked with Carrie Chapman Catt, president of the combined National American Woman's Suffrage Association (NAWSA), to publicize suffrage education. In this job she wrote hundreds of letters to and articles for newspapers in an attempt to influence national opinion.⁷⁵

By the time the suffrage amendment was passed in 1919, Harper was one of the few early fighters alive to celebrate the victory: Lucy Stone had died in 1893, Elizabeth Cady Stanton in 1902, and Anthony in 1906. Harper herself lived long enough to see that her predictions for great moral changes from women's suffrage did not materialize. Women voted, certainly, but they voted largely as men did, along party lines and not in large blocs or for sweeping social reform. Women voted, but they did not win political power: they were not elected to state or national legislatures or as mayors and governors in numbers nearly representative of their percentage of the population. Rather, with the winning of the vote, women returned to their traditional, nineteenth century roles as supporters, followers, and fund raisers for male candidates. Socially too they seemed unwilling to forsake the image of the feminine ideal. In general, discriminatory legislation remained, treating women differently from men in such areas as labor, marriage, divorce, juror qualification, property, and inheritance. Nor were women allowed self governance in child bearing and child rearing. Indeed, with few exceptions, the women's rights movement fell asleep after 1919 and did not reawaken until the late 1960s when there began a renewed attempt to pass the Equal Rights Amendment first introduced to Congress in 1923.⁷⁶

Where, or whether, Harper would have fit into the new women's movement can only be speculated. In late 1894 she wrote that the "evolution of women from the position of chattel [*sic*] to that of an independent individual has been in progress for centuries and is not yet accomplished."⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Phillips, "Ida A. Husted Harper," 140.

⁷⁶ See Estelle B. Freedman, "The New Woman: Changing Views of Women in the 1920s," *Journal of American History*, LXI (September, 1974), 372-93.

⁷⁷ Ida Harper, "Life Insurance for Women," *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine*, XVIII (November, 1894), 1054.

Many modern feminists would agree with this observation. Clearly, though, many would disagree strongly with Harper's persistent recommendations that women's primary duties were to home and husband. Just as Booker T. Washington is regarded by some as an accommodationist, Harper would also be viewed as far too conservative by many present day feminists. But she, like Washington, was a product of her times. The feminine ideal was as pervasive a stereotype as that of the shuffling darkie, but with roots extending much deeper into time.

If Harper's writings were at times contradictory, perhaps it was because she was struggling with that image of the feminine ideal. Perhaps she lacked the courage to forsake it completely in public; perhaps she did not want to. Or perhaps she realized, shrewdly, that her *Terre Haute* audience—rural, politically and religiously conservative—would dismiss her if she wrote more radically.

In truth, her actions spoke louder than her words: she continued her career despite her husband's objections, initiated and won a divorce from him at age thirty-nine, moved away from the town she had known for twenty years to live alone, went back to college at age forty-two, then devoted most of the remainder of her life to one cause, the whole time writing prolifically. Indeed, Harper's later writings, notably those appearing in the *New York Sun*, show a stronger emphasis on women's rights to choose their life styles:

Men can't help it because they are so emotional; nature made them that way, and, just as the sight of water sends a hydrophobic patient into convulsions, so the contemplation of wifehood and motherhood throws these emotional creatures into a fit of hysteria. Imagine every woman in the country who has access to a newspaper using it to glorify husbandhood and fatherhood! . . . There never has been a time since the alphabet was invented when we have not been solemnly assured that mother love is the strongest passion humanity is capable of. From the period of Moses down to June, 1900, we have been told that God and nature, the prophecies, the Ten Commandments, the beatitudes, the revelations, the Church, the Pope, the Bishops, the elders, the editors, and the politicians, intended woman to be the mother of the race. She would have found it out herself if nobody had ever told her . . . Why in the name of common sense are all the small fry in creation popping up at this late day and informing her that she has got to be what she always has been? Can it be possible that at this dawn of a new

century a free womanhood is about to assert itself and declare that, as man in all the past ages has exercised his individual wish as to whether he will be a husband and father, so woman henceforth will decide for herself whether she shall assume the relations of wife and mother?⁷⁸

Harper's writings during the Terre Haute years reveal a feminist in the making, a strong willed woman who saw the injustices but who was not quite ready to give up the privileges of the feminine ideal. In her later years she built upon her early views, becoming a national figure in the fight for the franchise but remaining forgotten in history.

⁷⁸ New York *Sun*, June 10, 1900.